

Who fills the gap during the shutdown?

By Christopher Gunty

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A week into the federal government shutdown, it seems that no progress is being made. Congress, the Senate and the White House all point fingers of blame, and nothing is getting done. If we ought to be the exemplar for the world of how a representative democracy works, we're not doing very well right now.

Many functions the government normally provides are closed. National park spaces – including the Lincoln Memorial, and veterans memorials on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. – got a lot of attention, and it is certainly disappointing for schoolchildren and World War II vets to be shut out of the sites they traveled far to see. Even food trucks in the nation's capital are affected by the scarcity of workers.

But the impact of the government impasse ripples far beyond the National Mall. Already the circles reach into states near and far. For now, the Head Start programs in Maryland that are operated by Catholic Charities of Baltimore are still up and running, but other programs whose funding was not due to be granted until after Oct. 1 have no dollars. Programs to provide food for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) can operate for a short time with state support, but that can't last forever.

Who will fill the gap? Local governments can step in and may provide some stopgap funding. More likely, government officials will presume that faith-based charitable organizations and other nonprofits will be available to help. That's presumptuous, because the church and similar entities have already been doing as much as they can.

It's also ironic because one of the sticking points of the budget battle is the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (popularly known as Obamacare) that included very narrow definitions of religious organizations, which would have excluded from conscience exemptions the very kind of entities that are picking up the slack during the government shutdown. Catholic charitable organizations provide services because service lies at the heart of their mission, not because the government mandates it.

The irony is even more pronounced when you realize that the complicated health care act, with its mandates and exchanges, exacerbated the problem. Many legislators admitted to not having read the whole, complex bill before voting on it. On the other hand, the service organizations build their foundation on the Bible,

including the Gospels, whose simple message can be summed up as “love your neighbor.”

What will it take for our legislators and the president to realize that the poor and vulnerable are not pawns in a high-dollar chess game? Congress and the president have messed things up pretty badly, but they are not the ones who suffer.

Neither player wants to be the first to blink for fear of being seen as weak. There is no doubt that if the Democrats in the Senate give up ground first, the Tea Party Republicans will hammer that home. And if the Republican majority in the House capitulates, senators and the president will make the case that the Republicans were wrong all along. The fact is that there must be a compromise somewhere in this mess, a compromise that keeps the government operating, serves the poor and vulnerable, and resolves the issues – some of them valid – that each side brings to the table.

At press time, there is no resolution in sight, but by the time this newspaper hits your mailbox, the shutdown and furloughs may be resolved. Looming ahead is also the question of the nation’s debt ceiling, which if unresolved could throw the economy into another downward spiral we can ill afford.

Once all those issues are taken care of, it would be well for those who govern to remember who filled the gap – local governments, churches and other nonprofits – while they let the nation fall into weeks of despair. And if they don’t remember that, then we are to blame; we elected them, they are accountable to us and we can elect replacements if we don’t like what we got.